Congress of the United States
Washington, D.C. 20515

Mark Zuckerberg
Chairman and CEO, Facebook
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Steve Huffman
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CEO, Twitter
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April 7, 2020

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg, Mr. Pichai, Mr. Weiner, Mr. Huffman, and Mr. Dorsey:

In the midst of a global pandemic, we write to you today concerned about the spread of misinformation on your media platforms. We applaud your efforts to collaborate on best practices to help spread good information and tamp down on bad information, but more needs to be done. During a geometrically spreading biological virus, viral social media posts about bogus cures, false claims, and conspiracy theories are deadly. You have great power to influence what the American public *thinks* is true – and with that power comes great responsibility.

Your responsibility to ensure that the information on your media platforms is as accurate as possible demands three actions, at a minimum:

1. <u>We ask that you include an accuracy prompt on your platforms as it has been shown to reduce the sharing of false and misleading information.</u>

A study from MIT Sloan and the University of Regina suggest that an accuracy prompt from social media networks could curtail the spread of misinformation about COVID-19.[1] The study found that 50% of study participants were more likely to share misinformation than to believe it, meaning that participants could effectively identify the

accuracy of headlines, but were still willing to share false headlines on social media. But when test participants were asked to consider an accuracy prompt, their level of truth awareness doubled and were less likely to share inaccurate news. Additionally, creating an avenue for users to submit dangerous COVID-19 misinformation and encourage experts to participate. Moreover, as the study's author David Rand notes, "Improving the quality of the content shared by one user improves the content that their followers see, and therefore improves the content their followers share. This in turn improves what the followers' followers see and share, and so on. Thus, the cumulative effects of such an intervention may be substantially larger than what is observed when only examining the treated individuals."

2. <u>We ask that you move aggressively and immediately to shut down "bots" and other autonomous agents that exist solely to amplify politically-charged misinformation.</u>

Several of your sites have started taking cautious first steps at shutting down the most egregious "bots", but a casual search of any social media feed shows that this work is far from complete. Meanwhile, those bots continue to amplify disinformation, feeding further risk into our public health system.

Given the large and growing number of "bot checker" accounts, algorithms should be used to suspend the accounts of a much larger number of current offenders. Adding an affirmative opt-back-in test with appropriate human verifications would be an easy way to ensure protections to legitimate users. But in all cases, this is not the time to reward clicks or numbers of followers. We must prioritize public health first.

3. <u>We ask that you shut down accounts of real users who are spreading deadly information, including political figures.</u>

We cannot yell fire in a crowded theater, and yet the spread of misinformation on your sites is vastly more deadly. Last October, when Mark Zuckerberg testified before the House Financial Services committee, he said that its rules would not allow the Nazi party to post information on Facebook. In 2018, a member of the American Nazi party secured the Republican nomination to represent Illinois 3rd Congressional district, and when asked if those same rules would prevent that individual from posting the same information under the guise of political speech, Mr. Zuckerberg responded "that depends on a bunch of specifics that I'm not familiar with and can't answer to". That answer was shocking and unacceptable in October of 2019. It is deadly in April of 2020.

Some of your platforms have already taken steps to address the misinformation, but far more needs to be done to stop the spread of information harmful to the public health. Many of your platforms have acted aggressively internationally and that same swift action should happen in the U.S. Over the last few days, Twitter Inc., Facebook Inc. and Google's YouTube have all removed posts shared by Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro about <u>hydroxychloroquine</u> and coronavirus misinformation that violates the social media companies' rules against posting harmful content. Further, there is no discernible difference between our President's praise of the drug and Bolsonaro's outside of Trump

saying the drug has a "chance" to work. For those users that repeatedly and continually spreads misinformation, they should be banned from using the platform. The fine line between hurtful, helpful, and hopeful is too thin in these harrowing times.

Fighting this global pandemic is all of our responsibility. Acknowledging the reality that you are a media outlet and not just a neutral platform may put some of your revenue at risk and expose you to higher compliance costs.   But this is a moment when we are all called upon to use the resources we have to fight the challenges we face. That is why doctors are going to work with insufficient PPE. That is why grocery clerks are keeping their stores open even as it exposes them to potentially contagious customers. That is why Congress approved $2 trillion in additional spending to mitigate this public health and economic crisis. I implore you to join us in this fight, and use your own power to slow the spread of disinformation, and to save lives.

Sincerely,

Sean Casten
Member of Congress

Bill Foster
Member of Congress

Juan Vargas
Member of Congress

Nanette Diaz Barragán
Member of Congress

Madeline Dean
Member of Congress

Theodore E. Deutch
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/s/
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